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Article:

A History of Movie Posters

by Bruce Hershenson, 1998

Today movie posters are valuable collectibles, but in the beginning, they were just one more way the big studios tried to convince audiences to go to the movies. Bruce Hershenson, a vintage poster dealer, explains the origins of movie poster collecting.

Before 1940, each film studio maintained its own offices (or exchange) in every major city. The studios would send the films and their posters to all the exchanges and from there, they would be distributed to the surrounding theaters. The big city theaters would just go to the exchange and pick up the films and posters right before they would show them (for big films they might order extra posters in advance of the opening to create an elaborate display). Theaters in smaller towns would often receive their films via Greyhound bus, which back then serviced just about every town in the country. The films would be in containers that would have the posters (often just one or two one-sheets and a set of lobby cards) tucked in a pouch on the outside of the container.

Most theaters would show a film for 3 or 4 days (as part of a program that might include 2 features, a cartoon, a newsreel, and possibly a serial chapter), and then send it on (via bus) to the next theater. Often the theater manager would put the film on a late night bus right after his last showing and it would arrive at the next theater the following morning, in time to be displayed for that night's show. The film might go by bus through a circuit of many theaters before returning to an exchange. After the film returned to the exchange, it would go back out to other theaters, and often the posters had to be replaced, as they were torn and tattered from being put up and taken down several times.

This more than anything explains why posters from before 1940 are

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extremely rare. Theater owners couldn't give their posters to collectors, no matter how hard they begged, because they were needed at the next theater. This whole system of having to deal with each studio separately might sound very inefficient, but remember that in the 1920s and 1930s many theaters were owned by the studios and so only showed that studio's product; and most of the independents would only get their films from a couple of studios, so it wasn't that complicated.

But if all the posters were returned with the films, how are there any posters at all from before 1940? For one thing, one type of poster, window cards (14" x 22") were bought in large quantities by an individual theater and (after they added their name and play dates to the top) distributed to store windows around town. Those were given away after the film was done playing. Another way they survive is in the backs of old picture frames, for framers would often use window cards (obtainable for free) as backing boards.

But as for other posters remaining today, a huge amount come from other countries, for those did not have to be returned to the U.S.; at the time, the value of the posters was less than the cost of the postage to return them. There have been huge finds of pre-1940 U.S. posters in Canada, Columbia, and many other countries.

In addition there have been some great finds in the U.S., such as the Cozy Theater Collection in Los Angeles. This was a theater that maintained its own exchange of posters from the early 1930s to the 1950s for distribution to Los Angeles theaters. In 1968 the theater owner offered his entire collection of posters (containing tens of thousands of posters and lobby cards, and hundreds of thousands of stills) for sale for \$25,000, and it was hard to find a buyer! At today's prices, the collection would sell for millions of dollars.

Other than the huge finds (which probably account for 90% of the pre-1938 posters known), posters also are sometimes found in one other main way. In the 1910s and 1920s (and to a lesser extent in the 1930s), builders would often look for material to put within the walls of buildings (or under the floors) to serve as insulation. Some enterprising builders hooked up with poster exchanges to take large amounts of outdated posters and put them in the walls of their new homes. I know of at least ten occasions where someone has been remodeling their house in the 1990s and discovered posters in the walls or under the floor. Sometimes they are moldy and mildewed and require large amounts of restoration, but sometimes they are so tightly pressed together that they survive in relatively excellent condition.

The vast majority of pre-1938 posters known were found in one of the above ways. Very rarely a theater owner (such as the legendary Charles Dyas, who started collecting in 1922) might order extra posters to keep, or someone who had access to posters might keep a particular poster as a keepsake, but by and large absolutely everybody who handled posters viewed them as disposable advertising, much like newspapers. Old newspapers (like comics books or baseball cards) survive in quantity only because they were sold by the millions, and some people never throw out anything. Movie posters, on the other hand, were never obtainable by the general public. It does seem particularly amazing that the studios themselves never thought to maintain an archive of their posters. In recent years some of them have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars buying back a tiny percentage of the posters that they literally sold for pennies each!

I am not understating the rarity of pre-1938 posters when I say that for at least a large number of films not a single poster or lobby card is known, and for many others only lobby cards or window cards are known. It is very unusual to find a film from before 1938 from a major studio on which more than ten copies of a one-sheet is known. (Posters from lesser studios are often found in large quantity because when the studio goes out of business they often have hundreds of copies of each poster on hand. An example is the Norman Film Company, which made all-black cast films. A huge supply of these posters were found, and they are among the most common of all silent posters.)

The system of every studio maintaining its own supply of posters in every one of its branch offices became very cumbersome, and in 1940, National Screen Service was formed. Warehouses (called poster exchanges) were set up in most major cities across the U.S., and each studio contributed its posters from the last couple of years to get it started (Exchanges definitely had posters from 1937-39 in abundance, but nothing like the quantities they would have of post-1940 material. The exchanges had virtually nothing from before 1937, which explains the vast rarity difference between pre-1937 and post-1940 material.

For each new release in 1940, the printers put National Screen Service (NSS) numbers on the bottom right of every poster. For 1940 only, they used a first number that began with 40, followed by a slash mark and more numbers (for example 4011/524). The "40" referred to 1940, and the rest of the numbers referred to in what order the poster had been printed, to make it easier for people to find the posters when stored in a large warehouse (many films had similar or the same titles). In 1941, the simplified the code to be just "41", followed by a slash mark and three numbers (for example 41/245). This was unfortunate, for in the present day it has resulted in acknowledgeable collectors assuming that they had a limited edition poster (in the previous case, #41 out of an edition of 245). This system continued all the way through the late 1970s, and makes identifying the year of 1940-1979 posters extremely easy. It also makes identifying re-issues simple, for they would put the re-issue year in the NSS number, and put a big capital "R" in front of it. So in the above example, if the 1941 film, NSS #41/245, was re-issued in 1954, it would have a new number such as R54/621.

It appears each exchange received a huge number of each poster (at least). I say this for two reasons. One is the economics of full-color printing are such that once you get the presses rolling, it is very cheap to keep on printing, and it is much more expensive to reprint items. Thus, it just would not make sense to print less than say five or ten thousand of a full-color item. Second, when exchanges were bought out in the 1960s (see below), it was not at all uncommon for a single exchange to have well over 100 of a single item, even after years of distributing that item. Of course there was not an even distribution of items, but I think it fair to say that for most items that were in exchanges, hundreds of each survive today. I also think it fair to say that for most pre-1937 items less than ten of each survive today (with the exception of those items that were found in huge quantities, such as the Norman Film Company posters).

In the 1940s, the studios would charge a rental fee to the theater, which would return the poster after using it (hence the warning that has frightened collectors for years, beginning "This poster is the property of National Screen Service..."). At some point NSS realized that it was easier to just print more posters and sell them outright (probably this was due to rising postal rates. I

have owned many posters that were mailed folded in the 1940s, without an envelope, and the cost was three cents!) I have brochures from exchanges from the early 1960s, where they offer new one-sheets for 25 cents each, with other prices on other sizes. The brochure might say 1964 and 1965 one-sheets, 25 cents each, 1963 and earlier 15 cents each! This shows they had no clue that these posters had collectible value, but also that there were next to no collectors before the early 1960s (just like comic book collecting). The few collectors there were in the 1950s kept buying all the posters they could afford from exchanges and didn't talk about it.

Then in the mid-1960s, some enterprising individuals began to buy the individual poster exchanges. I have no idea what they paid, but I have no doubt it was an absolute "steal", as the exchanges thought they had warehouses full of practically worthless old paper. (Of course I admire these individuals, for that one business decision made them financially set for life. They saw an opportunity no one else saw, and they took advantage of it.) The new owners began offering old posters at "collector's prices", usually around \$1.00 or \$1.50 for an older one-sheet. They did next to no advertising, and they often sold a great deal to local collectors, who heard about them by word of mouth. Some individuals, such as Tannar Miles, would buy posters from the exchanges in huge quantities and try to double their money at collectible shows. (My own personal introduction to movie posters came in 1968 at an Oklahoma City collectibles show, where I, being a full-time comic book dealer, was intrigued by the many boxes of movie posters I saw at Tannar Miles' tables. I spent over \$40 with him, a huge amount of money for me at the time, and I went home with a large box of posters and lobby sets).

But it didn't take long for the dealers to see that they were rapidly running out of the most popular titles (particularly horror and sci-fi) and they started raising prices on popular titles. The two exchanges that were best organized and sold the most posters to collectors were Theater Poster Exchange in Memphis, Tennessee, and Movie Poster Service in Canton, Oklahoma (both are still in business and both give excellent service). I remember seeing better quality posters priced at \$20 in the early 1970s, and wondering how much higher prices could go! But it is important to realize that pre-1937 posters were always scarce, even in 1965. I remember seeing a Valentino lobby card in 1969, and the price was \$20, when virtually no post-1940 item sold for as much. The price was high because even then, silent items were virtually unheard of. I have heard old-time collectors talk of the days when they bought Frankenstein and Dracula lobby sets from exchanges, but I know this never happened (maybe it was House of Frankenstein and House of Dracula and the stories got embellished over the years).

Sometime in the late 1970s, those who printed movie posters began printing huge numbers of extra posters which they did not fold in the regular way, but instead left unfolded ("rolled"). It is not clear to me if this was done with the studio's permission or knowledge, or if it was done independently by the printers. I would think it may well have started around the time of Star Wars or especially Return/Revenge of the Jedi, when these posters instantly began selling for collectible prices. Maybe someone contacted someone at the printers and "persuaded" them to print a bunch of extra posters. Unfortunately if this was done without the studio's knowledge, then we'll probably never know the full story, for the principals involved are unlikely to admit to it. At this time, several collectibles dealers became tied to whoever supplied rolled one-sheets, and began offering them to collectors. The odd thing is that it remained a very clandestine business, shrouded in mystery.

Even today, I have no idea who prints the rolled one sheets, how they can be contacted, how they can be purchased directly, and so forth. Of course those who act as middlemen for distributing these posters don't want the answers to get out, but it's just a matter of time before it happens.

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(Please email comments about this article to the author, Bruce Hershenson, at mail@brucehershenson.com or visit his website, at Bruce Hershenson Vintage Film Posters.)

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